

This issue snapshot is excerpted from [Unmasking the Future](#) (2021), a scan of major current socio-economic trends and developments, at local, provincial, national and international scales, authored by James Stauch of the Institute for Community Prosperity, commissioned by the Calgary Foundation.



A NEW (DIGITAL) DEAL:

Toward Equitable Lifelines to Civilization

As IBM Canada's new President Claude Guay recently observed, the pandemic has led to an unprecedented digital acceleration, and yet he notes that there is a big disconnect between executives and employees in the perceived level of support they need to stay connected.¹⁷⁵ Social distancing requirements have forced millions of Canadians to not only work from home, but to attend school or post-secondary classes online, and to use the internet as our main conduit of for social gatherings. The internet has become our lifeline to civilization. Not only is it an indispensable tool in the vast majority of workplaces, but it is vital for education, for democratic engagement, for data collection and measurement, and increasingly for health and medicine. And yet, it is not a public utility, and the quality of access among different Canadian communities is grossly unequal.

In fact, this unequal access has been the norm since the dawn of the internet, and the gap has only widened. Canadians in rural and remote communities experience speeds on average twelve times slower than urban Canadians, a problem made more serious by the need for tele-health solutions in northern and remote regions. As of November, \$1.75 billion is being committed by the federal government to bringing rural Canadians in line with urban residents - this includes a new partnership with SpaceX to bring low-Earth-orbit satellite-based based internet to remote locations, currently in the pilot testing phase.¹⁷⁶ However, some commentators say this is far too little, too late. As Fiona McKean of the ThistleDown Foundation states, the current set of initiatives are "like rolling out VHS to communities".¹⁷⁷ They will help with equitable access, but will do little to build the competitiveness of communities. Instead, she advocates for a national-scale fibre optic roll-out to thousands of Canadian communities, as well as more community ownership of internet service providers (ISPs). The ambition and scale of this can draw inspiration from Roosevelt's New Deal, which brought electrification to small US communities. O-NET, a nonprofit ISP owned by the Olds Institute for Community and Regional Development, is a brilliant Alberta example of a community-owned ISP.¹⁷⁸ In the US, 500 communities operate internet as a public utility, many having been pushed into this solution by Congress' removal of net neutrality. Chattanooga, the most famous of these, is the #1 consumer-rated ISP in the country.¹⁷⁹

Although mobile internet in Canada is cheaper than the US, it is twice as expensive as the UK or Germany, and many times more expensive than France, Australia, or most other OECD countries. Although prices have dropped somewhat over the past 3 years, Canada still “has the highest or second highest PPP-adjusted prices in all five [product] baskets”, according to Industry Canada.¹⁸⁰

As the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) has observed in a recent study, “digital development in Canada is underfunded, piecemeal, ad hoc and unorganized despite stakeholders sharing many of the same goals.”¹⁸¹ The combined effort of governments and “digital philanthropy” from foundations, companies, and donors for digital literacy programs, cybersecurity projects, digital infrastructure or even public conversations on digital tech and civil society is wholly inadequate.¹⁸² The report also notes the imbalance in how the federal government engages stakeholders, with a policy advocacy environment strongly skewed to industry participation over local communities and civil society groups. As Cassie Robinson of the UK National Lottery Fund observes, there is still a huge lack of knowledge of the importance of funding technology. Any funders who are genuinely concerned with social impact need to realize how important it is for organizations to be digitally savvy. Moreover, digital transformation is not simply digital adoption (e.g. going remote, going paperless). It involves completely rethinking why they exist and how they can meet people’s expectations in a digital society – it is a fundamental re-design, it is a mindset, and much more than the tech, per se.

Post-COVID in particular, the push to recognize the internet as a public utility is intensifying. Universal broadband service obligations are underway in Switzerland and Taiwan (the first two countries in the world to provide universal broadband, over a decade ago), and more recently in Finland, Spain, the UK and a number of other smaller nations. Canada itself declared a universal broadband commitment of 50mbps, but it is important to note that it has the status of a “basic service”.¹⁸³ A very useful step may to define broadband internet access as an “essential service”, which would mean no Canadian community can be denied access (much like electricity and water). As telecommunications is squarely within federal jurisdiction, this could be relatively straightforward. The First Nations Technology Council (unfortunately soon to be folding) had pushed for increased recognition not only of the digital divide, but also for “broadband spectrum as a Treaty right” (much as the Maori in New Zealand and Indigenous peoples in Mexico have pushed for).¹⁸⁴ Although Rural Development Minister Maryam Monsef has signalled an openness to making the internet a public utility¹⁸⁵, the most likely scenario in the short term is an Obamacare-style compromise with the big telecoms, where the private option remains alongside the guarantee of universal access.

As a previous section of this scan has highlighted, social impact organizations are challenged to address a host of pressing issues just when they’ve been forced to move their operations online.

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This shift has revealed yet another important digital divide in Canada. As a 2019 Senate report on the Charitable Sector highlighted, there is a technology gap, a data capacity and literacy gap, and a gap in how data and technology play into organization’s strategic priorities and their ability to innovate.¹⁸⁶ Most nonprofits do not have IT departments or data specialists, and funding for such priorities is in short supply.

We can also expect more discussion of who owns and regulates the platforms on which the social sector undertakes their activity, stores their data and communicates with citizens. There is a connection between the social impact sector’s need for next-level digital capacity and the broader goal of digital equity. As Laura Tribe from Openmedia maintains, “if the sector keeps up the fight for digital rights, everyone will have access to the internet.”¹⁸⁷ Moreover, to the extent the sector pushes relentless inclusion, tech design, whether in the sector itself, or on public (or even commercial) platforms will be better. Indeed, inclusive tech is arguably the most important priority society could be working on. As we have stated elsewhere,

“AI may well be the most important disruption to human social organization since the Agricultural Revolution. And yet, the very sector charged with monitoring, advocating for, and improving social impact and civil discourse, is barely talking about it” The vigilant, cautious, and creative amalgamation of machine super-intelligence with human learning has enormous potential to help us solve “wicked problems.” But is civil society sufficiently future-proof (or future-ready), when the stakes are so stratospheric, and the rewards and risks challenge the very bounds of our imagination?”¹⁸⁸

Last, there will be much more vigorous debate about whether Canada has struck the optimal balance between the public interest and privacy rights. Both Canada's and Alberta's contact tracing apps are examples of where striking this balance ends in failure: They are designed to so carefully safeguard privacy rights that they are essentially useless as public health tools. Public services that work well online through so-called "frictionless design" can run the risk of undermining privacy rights in the interest of efficiency, and consolidation and access of information (think, for example, of detailed medical records that are attached to you all your life – the benefits are obvious, but there are also clear privacy risks). Blockchain, discussed in depth in a previous scan, will help with this, but we could look at what other countries have done to thread this needle. Estonia is one promising jurisdiction worth looking at. "Named 'the most advanced digital society in the world' by *Wired*, Estonia has built an efficient, secure and transparent ecosystem where 99% of governmental services are online. It is no surprise then that Estonians have designed numerous digital solutions to help tackle the COVID-19 pandemic crisis."¹⁹⁰

"The Internet is not a luxury, it is a necessity."

Barack Obama¹⁸⁹

"We have to stop thinking of the internet as a commodity... It isn't a car."

Fiona McKean, ThistleDown Foundation. (Future of Good Summit, Nov. 25, 2020)

"The pandemic has forced us into a virtual existence, on top of which everything sits... Without the internet, you can't participate. You're relegated to second class."

Kamau Bobb, global head of diversity strategy and research at Google